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Frederic R. Coudert*

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Address of Welcome
to the
Belgian War Mission

at City Hall, August 21, 1917

by

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ADDRESS OF WELCOME TO THE BELGIAN COMMISSION AT CITY HALL, AUGUST 21st, 1917.
BY FREDERIC R. COUDERT.

GENTLEMEN:

The welcome which we extend to your Excellency and the members of your Commission has in it something peculiar, making this an occasion differing in kind rather than in degree from those that have gone before. You represent more than a friendly and faithful nation with whom we are allied in a great conflict. You represent more than a country; Belgium has ceased to be merely a nation; it has become in and of itself a great cause. It is the touchstone by which men and nations must be judged. As men stand for Belgium so they stand for law, justice and morality. As they oppose Belgium so they must definitely range themselves with those dark forces that despise human justice and divine law, and worship force and force alone.

The American people, living thousands of miles from the great conflict, confiding in their traditional isolation from world politics, may at times have felt doubts as to the attitude of this country or of that in the great struggle; but upon one point there has been such unanimity of opinion as we have, perhaps not yet seen in the United States. Never for one moment, since the fateful days when that supposed "necessity that knows no law" sent the Prussian hosts burning, devastating and killing into your peaceful land, has the American people had one neutral or indifferent thought regarding Belgium. Throughout this land there has been but one voice, among all worthy of the American name, proclaiming that the cause of Belgium was the cause of America, the cause of human right and human dignity.

In those first three days of August, 1914, the fate of civilization literally hung upon the choice of Belgium. On the one hand peace, prosperity and material gain were offered in return for mere non-resistance to the passing Teuton hosts, intent upon the final destruction of France. On the other hand was certainty of infinite suffering, devastated homes, massacres of the innocent, and a stricken and subjugated land. The world waited breathless in those brief hours for Belgium's decision. Had Belgium, the smallest of the nations, disarmed in advance by the guarantee of her powerful neighbors, yielded to the most puissant military engine that this planet has yet seen in operation, France, surprised in the beginnings of her mobilization, must, it seems, have been crushed, and Teutonism, that incarnate doctrine of material force and negation of moral law, swept triumphant through a prostrate Europe.

Who could have blamed Belgium had she hesitated or faltered? Have a people ever been confronted with such an awful choice?

I have seen the desolate ruins of your once beautiful towns, where scientific barbarism had destroyed, as only modern science can destroy. I have seen your peaceful laborious women and children driven down the roads, fugitives from their burned homes, by the brutal soldiery of the modern Attila, and yet in that solemn moment, under the leadership of that King who embodies all the fundamentals of real kingship, symbolizing in his own person, the valor and sacrifice of his people, Belgium did not for one instant balance peace and prosperity against honor.

The answer to the insolent Prussian demand for admission at the gate was given through the cannon mouth at Liège, and then for the first time in the modern world was seen the spectacle of a nation, intelligent, educated and well aware of the consequences, going against hopeless odds into voluntary self-immolation. At such a cost was devoted France given time to mobilize, and the great British democracy made to realize that liberty and national existence called them into irrepressible conflict with the power that knew no law.

Far-off America, aghast at the complete defiance to moral and divine law, was shaken with such emotions as have not stirred the land since the days when national existence hung in the balance.

We, in America, were dreaming of the reign of law and of universal peace. We little suspected the designs of that power which for well-nigh half a century had been planning to destroy all that structure of law and morality which men had built up in the modern world as a safe-guard to liberty and civilization. America knew that the neutrality of Belgium, guaranteed solemnly by the nations, was the cornerstone of the public law of Europe. We knew that guarantee of the peace of the brave people of Belgium to be the resultant of the efforts of generations of men for law and peace among the nations. We knew that it was the most sacrosanct obligation entered into by governments and statesmen in modern times. We knew that the deliberate assassination of Belgian national life by the great power which had guaranteed her independence and liberty struck at the root of every thing that men held honorable and sacred. We saw that if the attack were crowned with success, law among the nations must come to an end and we must frankly admit that the morals of the Stone Age, buttressed by the science of the Twentieth Century, had finally prevailed over what men had chosen to think justice and right. We saw a power which, deliberately casting away all moral or legal restraints, had divorced action from character and morality. Intellect directing force was to reign supreme in a non-moral world.

America, realizing all this, knew that the conflict was as irrepressible as that of more than half a century ago between freedom and slavery. There was and can be no middle way: a Teutonic non-moral world, or an order based upon our aspirations for right and justice—a slavery to organized power trampling alike upon the rights of nationalities and individuals, or liberty for the nation and the individual to develop freely. Once the choice of Belgium was made, the American people, with that sure and safe intuition which so often makes the instincts of the people wiser than the statecraft of kings or cabinets, saw that the conflict must end either in the triumph of justice, or in that of the *régime* of "blood and iron." From that day to this the issue has not changed. There are voices craven but loud, ignoble and ignorant, often base and bought, that in high places and in low clamor for a peace that is no peace, but a truce consecrating the acme of injustice. These voices would, indeed, undo the choice of Belgium and make her sacrifice vain. They would reverse the verdict of the American people and compromise with that brutal military autocracy that knows no principle save the "Will to power."

Such voices do not, indeed, represent America. In such moments the spectacle of Belgium arises before every real American with a compelling dignity and a power to inspire our nation in the closing phase of the awful struggle. The choice made by the little, almost unarmed, nation is, and will continue to be, the decision of America. There can be no compromise, and there never will be any peace, with the spirit that dictated the invasion of Belgium. It is no question of territorial adjustment, of mere money compensation; that power which, dominating the German people, has for more than a generation meditated this war on human right and liberty must be eliminated from the world ere the world can have any peace. A new and a different, a law-controlled and morally inspired spirit must prevail among the German people. When they learn that war as a national industry has been a failure, that in the long run the moral forces dominate the modern world, that a society in which power and power alone is worshipped is doomed to failure, then, indeed, may we have a real peace.

Until this result is brought about America will do her share. Be not deceived by the few discordant voices aiming to pour comfort into enemy ears. Our American people are united as they have never been before in the determination that that spirit which has sacrificed Belgium and sought to place mankind under the iron yoke shall be eliminated once and for all, in order that mankind may again attempt with a firmer grasp and on a surer basis to substitute law for force, decency and order in international relations for brutal aggression.

What an inspiration to the world has come from the fearless utterances of that great churchman Cardinal Mercier, embodying the most courageous traditions of the Christian church; standing as fearless before the barbarian hordes of the modern world as did the great Leo before their Goth predecessors. The war has produced no more superb figure of courage and devotion; a glory to the Christian church and to his people. His words have found an echo, and have awakened a response in every American heart.

As the highest, noblest efforts in the Christian world have been inspired by the symbol of the Cross, so down through the ages to come men may well look back to the crucifixion of devoted Belgium as a symbol of the triumph of right over might; the demonstration of the divine in humanity prevailing over the brute instinct directed by that intelligence which scorns right.

We, the citizens of New York, welcome you, sirs, as the representatives of the great Cause; of our Cause. We welcome you as the representatives of that noble Nation which did not hesitate in the choice between death and dishonor. You have come as an inspiration to our people at a period of National crisis. You have warmed our hearts with a glow of admiration and enthusiasm. Our portals are open to you, and we welcome you as the friends whom America must ever admire and whose example she will strive to emulate.

August 20, 1917.



